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4 up for education commissioner - None of the finalists from Ky. board interviews next week

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Education leaders from Missouri, North Carolina, New Mexico and Massachusetts are the finalists under consideration to become Kentucky's new state education commissioner.

No Kentuckian made the final cut.

The finalists are:

Dennis W. Cheek, a senior fellow and former vice president for education at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, Mo.

Terry Holliday, superintendent of the Iredell-Statesville Schools in Statesville, N.C.

Catherine Cross Maple, deputy cabinet secretary for the New Mexico Public Education Department.

Michael Sentance of Concord, Mass., former regional representative for the U.S. Department of Education in New England.

The Kentucky Board of Education released the names of the finalists Friday morning.

"We've selected these four based on their state and national education policy work, state and national recognition for their accomplishments in education, national foundation leadership, executive level experience outside of education and work with executive and legislative branches of government," board chairman Joe Brothers said in statement.

Brothers said that trimming the list of candidates to four had been "challenging" because the "diversity of the pool of candidates for this position was excellent."

"The board will continue its verification of credentials and research into all four candidates, and we look forward to meeting with them again next week," he said.

The Kentucky board plans to hold individual interviews with all four finalists at a special meeting in Frankfort on Thursday. Board members presumably could make a selection then - pending background checks - or elect to have further deliberations.

Meanwhile, Brothers said that the board welcomes public input on the finalists and that comments can be made to any Kentucky Board of Education member in person or by phone.

Contact information for board members is available at www.education.ky.gov.

Kentucky School Boards Association communications director Brad Hughes, who spent some time reviewing the finalists online Friday, called them an "impressive group."

"Their credentials certainly are impressive, and they have a wide range of backgrounds and experiences," Hughes said. "It's not just a matter of titles. If you look beyond that, there is a great depth and breadth of experience."

Hughes added, however, that some probably will be disappointed that there is no Kentuckian among the finalists.

"I'm sure there will be some who wish a Kentuckian had been on the list," he said. "But the bottom line for everybody should be that they chose the very best person to move Kentucky public schools forward."

The person ultimately selected will replace former commissioner Jon Draud, an educator from Northern Kentucky, who stepped down because of health issues.

About 300 people applied for or were contacted about the job of education commissioner. Greenwood/Asher & Associates, a search firm hired by the state board, then selected 12 leading candidates, whom the board interviewed in Northern Kentucky last month.

Board members narrowed the list to four finalists during a closed meeting in Lexington on Thursday. The board has said it wants to name a new commissioner by Aug. 1.

Here is a more detailed look at the finalists:

Sentance was Secretary's Regional Representative for the U.S. Department of Education in New England from 2001 until January 2009. He also has been a senior education adviser to the governor of Massachusetts; Massachusetts secretary of education; and director of the Governor's Legislative Office in Massachusetts. Sentance holds law degrees from Duquesne and Boston universities.

Maple has been deputy cabinet secretary for New Mexico's education department since 2004. She also has been an assistant secretary for vocational rehabilitation in New Mexico and has held several posts, including director of student support services, for the Albuquerque Public Schools. She was CEO of the YWCA in Albuquerque; Project Outreach coordinator for the University of New Mexico; taught at the University of Nevada; and has been a public school teacher. She holds a doctorate from the University of New Mexico.

Holliday is the School Superintendent of the Year in North Carolina and held the title once before. While he was superintendent in Statesville, the district received the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. He also has been an associate school superintendent in South Carolina; a principal and assistant principal at the high school level; and a junior high band director.

Holliday holds a doctorate from the University of South Carolina.

Cheek's experience includes various posts at the John Templeton Foundation in Pennsylvania and work as senior consulting professional at the Science Applications International Corp. in Tennessee. He directed the Office of High School Reform, Research and Adult Education in the Rhode Island Department of Education; was project coordinator for the New York State Department of Education; and has been a teacher at the elementary, middle, high school and college levels. He holds doctorates from Pennsylvania State University and Durham University.

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